



THE CONTRADICTIONS OF DEMOCRACY AND THE QUESTION OF MINORITY: A THEORETICAL EXPOSITION

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ABSTRACT

The work is basically a theoretical work and it concentrates on the theoretical literatures on democracy, both liberal and Marxist, to explore the inner contradictions of democracy with regard to minority accommodation.

KEYWORDS: Democracy, Enlightenment, Modernity, Minority, Accommodation

After several frustrating attempts to attain BUDDHATVA, Siddhartha, on his D-day decided that whatever happens, he will not fall short of attaining Enlightenment. A particular line which the famous Sanskrit poet Ashwaghose uses in his Buddhacharita to describe this climax seems very interesting in our context: Siddhartha resolves that even if due to some miracle "all the beings become unanimous or becomes one at a particular issue," (cited in Das Gupta, 1998:) even if such a strange thing occurs, no one can resist him from attaining Enlightenment. The Great Master, the former prince of Kapilavastu, who spent his entire life to spread the message of Maitraie among the common mass, and remained agnostic with regard to the ecclesiastical, was at least confident about the impossibility of unanimity among beings at least in this world and we may simply agree.

It seems natural that men will differ from each other rather than confirming. With the possibility of unanimity being merely non-existent, the next best alternative that we follow is arriving at a decision via majority. However, a majority decision is by definition not a unanimous decision, and therefore it is bound to go against a minority who might legitimately develop a feeling of being discriminated by "the people." This is, no doubt, one of the most serious problems of a democracy. In a democracy once a decision is taken it is binding on every one – even on its dissenters. In theory a democracy might be romantically portrayed as a government of, for and by the people, but in practice a democracy is nothing but a government elected on the basis of majority. It is therefore only natural that a government thus elected would aim at satisfying its voters and not its hostile opposition. It is here that the issue of discrimination arises. In any democracy there might be minorities so insignificant in number that they cease to exert any influence in the number game played within the system.

Moreover, that in a democracy, however much we elate its ideological aspects, an individual is not in a position to control the governmental decisions is known to all. An individual might have voted for a party whom he thought to be socialist in its ideals, but after coming to power by gaining majority the government formed by this party might turn out to be worst than a Fascist party. The individual might feel helpless, discriminated and cheated, but he has nothing to do because he himself was a part of that government as he had voted for it. This problem was well conceptualized by Rousseau when he said that the electorate is free only at the moment of voting; after that, especially after a government is formed, he is once again in chains. [Rousseau, (1761), 1955:240-241] Rousseau no doubt found a remedy in direct democracy and in his concept of general will. As we know, the complexities of issues and the bulk of numbers in a modern state make the former an unattainable ideal, and the latter also, ironically, establish majoritarianism in practice.

No wonder that Bentham, the rationalist, was highly suspicious of any talk of fictitious body like community or general will which might claim to be over and above the individual and discriminate them in the name of governing them. Bentham warned us that community is nothing more than the sum of the individuals composing it, and therefore each one counts. The fear of an oppressive public opinion also haunted his disciple John Stuart Mill. To protect the individual from the tyranny of the majority he found no other way than securing the individual's sphere of self regarding actions from the jurisdiction of both state and society. Yet it is interesting that with all his apprehensions about the tyranny of the majority, Mill expressed his faith only in a representative democracy. He knew that active participation of a vigilant people was the only panacea for restricting the evils of democratic governance. As he wrote in his Representative Government, "... it is evident that the only government which can fully satisfy all the exigencies of the social state is one in which the whole people participates; ... any participation, even in the smallest public function, is useful; ... nothing less can be ultimately desirable than the admission of all from a share in the sovereign

power of the State" (cited in Arblaster, 1994:61). Decisions affecting all should be a rational decision arrived by all.

As a matter of fact, democracy as an ideal believes in reaching decisions rationally through discussions. Matters of public interest, it believes, should not be left at the whims of the kings and the blue blood. Instead it puts forward the dictum that what affects all should be decided rationally by all. Therefore such a decision seems correct on two grounds: (i) it is a decision of everybody; and more importantly, (ii) It is a rational decision. No wonder that a society will possess a lot of irrational elements than rational ones, and thus, these elements must always be kept in check for the benefit of the people. That is why the early liberals like Locke could easily exclude the uneducated, irrational working mass from his civil society without a bad conscience. The early liberals believed that not everyone had the capacity to opine let alone decide. Thus the uneducated working mass, the emotional women, the Negroes and the other black and brown barbarians and uncultured of the colonies were given no space within the democratic discourse and were excluded without hesitation. It was, they thought, not a question of discriminating the workers, the women and the colonies, but an attempt to protect the holy ideal of democracy from degeneration, decay and contamination from the irrational.

If we keep in mind that democracy is in fact another important offshoot of Enlightenment and modernity, then it would not surprise us to note that democracy, from its outset had an OTHER in the workers, the women, the back and the colonized. Ironically it needed several mass democratic movements to rectify the situation and naturalize and accommodate the other within the democratic space. The trend continues to this day, but now democracy has found a new OTHER in the several ethnic and ethno-nationalist groups who refuse to accommodate themselves within the homogenizing project of democratic nation-state building. In its overzealous efforts to build a homogeneous nation state democracies all over the world are blatantly violating the human rights of many of its minority groups, ironically in the name of democracy. The result is a series of serious, bloody ethnic conflict all over the globe.

The problem is, in a democracy a minority has to obey the majority dictates all the time which leads to the creation of a feeling of discrimination. After the formation of a government, a minority has to conform to the dictates of majority and accept a law which it had hitherto opposed. This leads to a queer situation, and Rousseau rightly asked, "How can the opposing minority be both free and subject to laws to which they have not consented?". This is something which cannot occur. Therefore a feeling of discrimination is quite natural for a minority group who feel themselves to be systematically deprived by the majority. Anthony Arblaster rightly notes that if in a democracy there are some permanent minorities who know that issues which are most significant for their existence can be ignored simply by the fact of the operation of a majority principle, then that principle ceases to be adequate. (Arblaster, 1994: 66-68) As Arblaster notes, "The existence of permanent minorities, whose aspirations, wishes and even principles are systematically ignored or overridden in the collective decision making processes, can easily make a majoritarian democracy unworkable." (Arblaster, 1994: 68) This minority may be a religious group, or in modern times, some ethno-nationalist groups whose demands are systematically being out-weighted by the number of votes of the main stream discriminated majority. If any by such its democratic minority thinks government, that it is then continually it might be thinking of challenging the system itself. In extreme circumstances such a group might even take a desperate attempt to secede from the main stream and form a separate society and state of their own where they will be the majority. Ironically the number game might make the former majority a new deprived minority in the new situation.

So far we have been concerned with the issue of majoritarianism. But there is another serious question concerning "who governs". This question was first dealt by no less a person than Karl Marx. Marx could rightly conceive that it was not merely a problem of majority dominating minority. Instead, the reality of class struggle convinced Marx that the opposite had occurred: a minority had hitherto dominated the majority. The minority class, having monopoly over the means of production, sanctioned and protected by coercive state structure, dominates and discriminates the majority have nots. The solution therefore was not to be found within the existing paradigm, but only by bursting asunder the existing one and creating a new. In the present era, Marx believed, that class conscious proletariat must unite under the communist party to wage the final war against the minority oppressors, win the battle, and establish a new socialist society with the rule of majority being established for the first time in history. It is only here that all discrimination will come to an end and democracy in reality will be established. Till then, all talk of democracy is nonsense.

Marx's critique of existing democracy as bourgeois democracy, where people had "only the freedom to die", received a worldwide audience, who sincerely started to believe the indispensability of socialism for establishing real democracy without discrimination of any kind. So it seems that Marxism is a critique of bourgeoisie democracy and not of democracy. The emotional attachment and clear cut sympathy of both Marx and Engels towards Paris Commune demonstrates this point. "The Commune", as Marx wrote in his *Civil War in France* (1871), "was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of town, responsible and revocable at short terms. The majority of its members was naturally working men, or acknowledged representatives of the working class. The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time ... the police was at once stripped of its political attributes, and turned into the responsible and at all times revocable agent of the Commune. So were the officials of all other branches of administration." (Cited in Miliband, 1977:139-140) Even the magistrates and judges were elected, responsible and revocable. [see Bottomore (ed), 2000:151] Ironically they termed it as Dictatorship of the Proletariat. This model was desirable to them because it demonstrates all the rationality inherent in a democracy. Lenin decided to make this model more rational by ensuring strict surveillance of the vanguard of the party over the common people. The working people must be guided on the proper path to prevent them from being contaminated from the vices of the erstwhile bourgeois order. Therefore the real democracy of the majority, i.e., the dictatorship of the majority, must also be representative in nature. The working class must rule themselves through the old, wise men who constitute the vanguard of the party. Lenin, the master of tactics, tailored the word Dictatorship of the Proletariat to suit his own theoretical and practical needs, and used it against the social democratic renegades like Kautsky and Bernstein, who, he announced, were deviating from the Holy Doctrine of Emancipation propagated by the Master (Marx and Engels). It is rather surprising to find old Lenin irritated and vexed with his disciple Stalin who was invoking the Writings of his Masters (now Marx, Engels and Lenin!) to wage his Jihad against those he believed to be the enemies of the people. After all, Stalin's secret project of Marxist God Building Movement, BOGOSTROITEL' STVO, started by Gorky and Lunacharsky in 1890 (which however was strongly condemned by Lenin, ironically, the first Marxist god, if one is allowed to interpret in this way) needed Devils to be exorcised for the sanctity of the newly established workers democracy amidst the hostile, profane other world of capitalism. [For details about BOGOSTROITEL' STVO see Noll, 1996:54-55 & Kolakowski, 1978: Chapter 1, Vol.-1]

What happened in reality is the emergence of new minority elite of the party who started imposing its will over the majority. As Trotsky noted, the dictatorship of the proletariat turned into the dictatorship of the party. It further degenerated into the dictatorship of the Politburo and finally became the dictatorship of the Party President. The challengers like Trotsky and Bukharin became the new other of this alternative model of democracy and they were systematically discriminated and deprived in the name of protecting the people, this time, the real majority.

It turns out that whatever the theoretical logic of democracy might be, in practice; the consequences are either (i) the discrimination of a minority by a majority, or (ii) the dominance of minority (communist or rightist) elite over the real majority. So what is to be done? Should we abandon democracy and wait for Nietzsche's superman? Or, should we like Habermas, regard democracy as another incomplete project of modernity and restrain from throwing out the baby along with the bath-water? Certainly, as Adorno and Horkheimer noted, the Dialectics of Enlightenment had led democracy to its opposite, i.e., totalitarianism of both left and right brand. The world has been stunned by the audacities and tyrannies of both Stalinism and Fascism. Legitimacy acquired through the democratic path had been used by legal-rational offices to justify ethnic cleansing and even genocide.

But we can regard it as the aberration of the ideal and not the ideal itself. If we abandon the cliché that democracy is a government of, for, and by the people, and regard it as a form of government which reduces the gap between the governors and the governed, where the latter tries to keep the former's tendency of abusing power in check, then we might adopt a very different approach towards democracy. Democracy would no longer remain a slogan, but a real effort to constitute a public sphere [Habermas in Goodin & Pettit (ed.), 1997:105-106] where rational

communicative dialogue [Habermas in Goodin & Pettit (ed), 1997:108] between citizens would resolve various political conflicts. It is true, as Jon Elster has pointed out, "rational communicative dialogue" will not lead to unanimous decision. We may also accept Elster's criticism that it will consume much time and energy of its citizens and demand the participation of every one. [Elster in Goodin & Pettit (ed.), 1997:132-134] But one cannot, after all sit idle and complain that he is being discriminated. One must act and be active in order to seek remedy. It is only a democratic form of government which gives us such a scope. We can participate actively in the public sphere, analyze the pros and cons of the various issues and select the one which seems most rational and desirable. If after genuine discussions decisions are taken rationally considering the merit of each issue, it is likely that decisions would display and establish conditions of justice. It will also be a majority decision, but one which will not discriminate the minority. After all, it is not in a totalitarian regime, but in a democracy that a minority can safely raise its voice, freely propagate the rationality of their demand and try to gain the support of the majority in favour of their legitimate demands.

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